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A SILVER "MIRROR-CASE," INLAID WITH GOLD, IN
THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF ATHENS.

[PLATE XVII.]

In the collection of the Archæological Society of Athens is an object which, owing to its peculiar character and to the beauty of its execution, deserves special attention. It is called a mirror-case, and it came to the society from the former collection of the Ministry. The place where it was found is not known, but Mr. Tzountas tells me that he believes it to have come from Kephissia.

That it is a mirror-case or the back of a mirror is, I think, by no means certain, for, owing to its dilapidated condition, a positive determination of the use for which it was intended is impossible. It has been suggested that it formed the cover of a vase; this is, however, unlikely, for there is a top and a bottom to the design, which, were the object meant for some such purpose as the cover of a vase, would be so laid out that it could be looked at equally well from any point. However, it is the object itself and not its use that I wish to consider.

The mirror-case—for we may as well call it by this name—is made of silver inlaid with gold on parts of which details are roughly engraved. This technique resembles that of some of the famous swords found at Mycenæ.¹ It was not uncommon in

¹ *Bulletin de Correspondance Hellénique*, vol. x. p. 342 ff.

Greek art, and we see a good example of it in the bronze statuette of a priestess² in the British Museum, which has a mæander pattern of silver inlaid along the edge of the chiton.³ The mirror-case is circular and about 12.5 cm. in diameter. It is not of one piece of metal, but of two—an outer plain rim of silver, about 1 cm. broad, being fastened around, framing the inlaid portion. In section it is not flat. The outer rim is convex, while the inner part is composed of a flat band, encircling a wider convex band, and a small sunk circle forms the centre.

It is the inlaid portion that attracts our attention. Notwithstanding the much shattered condition of the object, one sees at the first glance that the inlaid design is of a double character, the broad convex band being occupied by purely geometric patterns, while the flat band encircling it is filled with scenes of human figures, all of them in lively motion. The geometric design is composed of nine circles, one of which is slightly larger than the others. Each circle contains a different pattern, while all the interstices are occupied by palmettes and rosettes. The border of all the circles is formed by the common wave pattern. It might on first thought seem strange that an artist who exhibits such variety in the pattern of the circles should have been satisfied to use only one form of border. This was apparently due to two facts: one, the few patterns the Greek artist had which were suited, on this very minute scale, to following a circle; the other (and this is the essential reason), that the edges of these circles coincide so that the borders of contiguous circles blend into one and the same, which would have been impossible had the borders been of dissimilar patterns. A third motive may be suggested, which cannot be proved, but of which I feel sure all who have studied Greek art will admit the force, namely, that if each circle had a separate border the design, as a whole, would be so broken up as to lack harmony, while now, owing to this mutual bond, it is gathered together into unity. The artist himself, however, apparently felt the need of giving

² MITCHELL, *History of Ancient Sculpture*, p. 280.

³ To judge by the description of the gifts received by Agamemnon from Cinyras, king of Cyprus, this technique was known in Homer's day (see *Iliad*, xi. 19 ff.; *Od.*, vi. 232). More complicated technique of the same sort is hinted at in *Iliad*, xviii. 488 ff.; *Od.*, xi. 609 ff.

life in some way to these long stretches of border, and to secure this he continually, but regularly, reversed the direction of the waves. For instance, the border of each circle runs in the opposite direction to the borders of the adjoining circles.⁴ Then, too, the waves of the two borders that divide the bands are reversed in the same way, the waves of the outermost border being turned towards the centre, thus drawing the design together and preventing any seeming tendency to spread beyond the edge.

When one comes to consider the patterns within the circles with which the convex band is inlaid, one finds that (with the exception of the larger one) they are composed of elements common enough in themselves, such as long-pointed hearts, palmettes, mæanders, rosettes, *etc.*, but that the combination of them is, if not unique, at least extremely unusual, and suggestive of the style rather of Japanese than of common Greek art. If, however, the character of these patterns is not characteristically Greek, the arrangement of them affords an example of one of the most typical qualities of Greek art—namely, its balance. Take, for instance, the two patterns at the top. Let me state, however, that I have no proof that they were meant to be at the top, for this part of the mirror-case is broken off from the outer rim—but whether at top or bottom does not affect my point. These two patterns consist respectively of diamonds and squares; the next two on the right of stars; the two on the left are less rigid than the others, and may perhaps be best described as being combinations of small figures not adapted to continuous repetition, such as are called by the Germans *Füllornamente*. Only the two at the bottom are now left, and I hope I shall not be thought to go too far when I say that these also are of the same character. At first sight, one design being based on a mæander, the other on a circle, these last two patterns seem to break the rule which I have tried to show holds good for all the rest. But on close examination one sees that the mæander runs in circles, surrounding little circular rosettes, and I think it is this general curving of the design which balances the marked circles of the adjoining pattern, and accounts for the fact that these two apparently dissimilar patterns do not clash one with the other.

⁴ Owing to a mistake this does not appear in my drawing.

We now come to the consideration of the flat band which, as I have said above, is occupied by designs composed of human figures. This band is divided into halves of which the upper represents twelve of the Labors of Heracles, while the lower is filled by a Bacchanalian scene. The main distinction of the halves is that, while the scenes on the upper are separated one from the other by straight lines at approximately equal distances, the lower half comprises only one scene divided irregularly by scrolls.

The series of Heracles-scenes begins with the killing of the Nemean lion. Heracles leans forward to the right, grasping the head of the lion in his arms, in the same way as we see him on a metope of the Theseum,⁵ on coins of Heraclea⁶ and Paeonia,⁷ and on the Alexandrian coins of Antoninus Pius.⁸ It would be easy to cite many other instances of the representation of this incident; I wish, however, not to make a catalogue of scenes showing the Labors of Heracles, but simply to illustrate the character of the work under consideration. My analogies also are taken from works of different dates, but we must bear in mind that such types as these are very persistent, recurring century after century.

The second scene is open to a double interpretation. It may be Heracles and Hippolyte. On one of the later metopes from Selinus, Heracles is shown seizing an amazon by the hair in the same way, though in other respects the metope has little similarity to the scene under consideration.⁹ One of the Theseum metopes,¹⁰ however, shows the scene in almost the same way as the mirror-case. The second interpretation of which our design is capable is that of Heracles and a Giantess, as on certain Alexandrian coins.¹¹ This latter is, I believe, the true interpretation, and Hippolyte follows later in the series.

In the third scene on the mirror the opponent of Heracles is

⁵ STUART and REVETT, III, chap. I. pl. XI. I; *Monumenti dell' Instituto*, x. 58. 1.

⁶ GARDNER, *Types of Greek Coins*, v. 6. 32.

⁷ *Coins of the Ancients (British Museum)*, 21. 6.

⁸ *British Museum, Catalogue of Alexandrian Coins*, pl. VI. 1044.

⁹ BENNDORF, *Die Metopen von Selinunt*, pl. VII.

¹⁰ *Mon. dell' Inst.*, x. 59. 2.

¹¹ *Brit. Mus. Cat. of Alex. Coins*, pl. VI. 1053.

so much destroyed that I do not think anything positive can be said of it; but I believe the scene shows Heracles throwing the Erymanthian boar down on Eurystheus, who is in a large jar, as on coins of Alexandria¹² and also of Perinthus.¹³

Next follows the contest between Heracles and the Ceryneian Stag. The figures are in the same position as on one of the Theseum metopes,¹⁴ so far as we can judge from the battered remains of it, and as in a bronze group at Palermo.¹⁵ This type occurs also in the same series of Alexandrian coins.¹⁶

The next scene shows Heracles, standing upright, drawing his bow. Although the Stymphalian Birds are not represented, owing, of course, to the smallness of the design, they are without doubt what is aimed at. We see Heracles in the same position on a black-figured vase¹⁷ (armed, it is true, with a sling and not with a bow), and on an Alexandrian coin,¹⁸ where the figure is almost exactly the same as on the mirror.

Following the Stymphalian Birds comes a scene where Heracles is shown managing a running horse, underneath whose feet lies a human body. This is much like the Theseum metope showing the horse of Diomedes,¹⁹ though in this latter no dead figure is shown. This group may perhaps be intended for Heracles and Hippolyte—a similar representation of the scene being given on certain coins of Antoninus Pius.²⁰

Next comes the Augean Stables. A striking analogy to this scene is to be found in one of the metopes of the temple of Zeus at Olympia, in which Heracles is shown in the same striding position, with the fork raised over his shoulders.²¹ Besides the fork, he is here also provided with a basket, as on another coin of Antoninus.²²

¹² See Nos. 2567 and 2540 in the *Government Collection, Athens*.

¹³ *Königliche Museen zu Berlin, Beschreibung der Antiken Münzen*, I. pl. v. 54.

¹⁴ STUART and REVETT, III, XI. 3. chap. I, pl.; *Mon. dell' Inst.*, x. 58. 3.

¹⁵ CLARAC, *Musée de Sculpture*, pl. 794.

¹⁶ See Nos. 2490, 2694 and 2956 in the *Government Collection, Athens*.

¹⁷ GERHARD, *Auserl. Griechische Vasen.*, pl. 324.

¹⁸ *Brit. Mus. Cat. of Alex. Coins*, pl. vi. 1048.

¹⁹ *Mon. dell' Inst.*, x. 58. 5. STUART and REVETT, III, 11. 5.

²⁰ SALLET, *Zeitschrift für Numismatik*, 1882, I. 4.

²¹ OVERBECK, *Geschichte der Griechischen Plastik*, p. 336.

²² SALLET, *Zeitschrift für Numismatik*, 1882, p. 4. pl. I. 5.

Now comes Heracles holding the Cretan Bull by horn and muzzle, in the same way as on another Olympian metope²³ and on coins of Selinus.²⁴ The same scene occurs reversed on the Alexandrian coins.²⁵

Following the Cretan Bull is the scene which I believe represents the Horses of Diomedes, though I have found no very close analogies. But the same series of Alexandrian coins which I have frequently referred to offers here another instance of a type which is similar to the one we are considering.²⁶ On the coin only the heads of the horses show, but there are two of them with Heracles and Diomedes between; the general composition of the two scenes being much the same.

After the scene representing the Horses of Diomedes comes what is without doubt intended to depict Heracles and the Cattle of Geryon. I cannot find any precisely similar treatments of this scene, but on an early black-figured vase we find Heracles represented leading away the cattle, no sign being given of Geryon himself.²⁷ Also Pausanias,²⁸ in his description of the Amyclean throne, says *καὶ Ἡρακλῆς τὰς Γηρυόνου βοῦς ἐλαύνει*, making no mention of Geryon, so that here we may see the prototype of our scene. I think it is almost certain the artist, owing to the size and shape of the field of the design, treated the subject in a way corresponding to his treatment of the Cretan Bull.

We come now to the scene with Cerberus. Again I find no exactly similar treatments of the subject—no treatment where, as here, Heracles is dragging forward a single(?)-headed dog; a type not quite the same, but not very unlike, occurs on the Alexandrian coins.²⁹

Last of all, we have a scene which can be interpreted in either of two ways. It may be the Hydra, as on coins of Phaestus,³⁰ or the Apples of the Hesperides. It is uncommon for Heracles to

²³ *Ausgrabungen zu Olympia*, v. 17; *Die Funde von Olympia*, pl. xx.

²⁴ GARDNER, *op. cit.*, II. 17.

²⁵ *Brit. Mus. Cat. Alex. Coins*, pl. VI. 1050.

²⁶ *Govt. Coll., Athens*, No. 2700.

²⁷ GERHARD, *op. cit.*, 105-6.

²⁸ III. 18. 13.

²⁹ *Government Collection, Athens*, No. 2542.

³⁰ GARDNER, *op. cit.*, pl. IX. 7.

be shown getting the apples for himself, but that the type was known is shown us by a black-figured vase.³¹ Moreover, it is more likely that the Apples would be at the end of the series than the Hydra. Also, if we turn once more to the Alexandrian coins,³² we find one that has almost exactly the same design as this on the mirror-case.

If we now regard the scene on the lower half of the band, we find a large part so destroyed that restoration is impossible. The rest, as we see from the ass, the panther, and the figure with a thyrsus, without doubt has to do with some Bacchanalian subject; but whether or not the chief person is Heracles, as is sometimes the case in such scenes,³³ it is impossible to state. It seems to me probable that Heracles is the protagonist.

Having thus considered these scenes, the fact can hardly help striking us, that although we find more or less exact analogies in Greek art for all the Labors of Heracles, as here represented, yet of nine of them the closest analogies are in Egyptian work—the Alexandrian coins. When in connection with this we remember the Eastern feeling exhibited in the geometric patterns, it seems to me not unlikely that this mirror-case was the work of a Greek artist working in Egypt under the influence of both Greek and Eastern art.

If we consider the absolute dissimilarity of the two styles of delineation on the two bands—one being mathematic and the other imaginative—we shall recognize that great skill has been shown in the combination of them, so that they do not clash. The methods adopted are very simple. In the first place, the strictly limited fields of the geometric designs are balanced by the division, with straight lines, of the Labors of Heracles into distinct scenes. It might seem as though the lower half of the rim—the Bacchanalian scene—ought also to be split up in the same way. The reason why it is not so treated is that, as we have seen above, there is a top and bottom to the work, and if the whole of the outer rim were cut by lines as in the upper half, there would be an appearance of rays which would tend to destroy

³¹ BENNDORF, *Griechische und Sicilianische Vasenbilder*, 42. 1.

³² *Brit. Mus. Cat. Alex. Coins*, pl. VI. 1052.

³³ OTTO JAHN, *Satyren und Satyrdrama auf Vasen*.

the distinction of top and bottom. However, in order that the two portions should not be too unlike, the maker has divided the lower part at irregular intervals by scrolls; and further, to combine the differing design of the two bands into a harmonious whole, he has introduced into the figure-scenes little scrolls which carry the *pattern motive* into the imaginative series. In themselves they detract from rather than add to the excellence of the scenes, for these are composed with that feeling for filling the field of the design which the Greeks exhibited from the earliest times.

Take, for instance, the second scene—the one showing either Hippolyte or a giantess. Two figures could not be better composed to fill a background of this shape. See how the lion-skin falls into the space left by the bending of Heracles' body; how his club fills the upper corner; how the thigh of the figure on the ground fills the space between the outspread legs of Heracles—and the chief beauty of it all lies in the fact of its naturalness. Take the scene with the Stymphalian Birds, and note how perfectly the spread legs, the leaning body, and the stretched bow fill the space. Look at the scene with Cerberus. Again, the figure of Heracles tugging at the dog, his feet apart, and lion-skin flying, fills the field of the design with a naturalness that makes it look the simplest of tasks to draw such a scene, instead of one of the greatest difficulty. So it is with all these metope-like scenes. Another point of excellence, and one that is essentially Greek, is the balance of one scene by another. It is like what is to be observed in the metopes of the Parthenon, and it is carried out no more pedantically on the mirror-case than on the temple. Take the two scenes at top and see how the action is on lines that go in opposite directions, so that they lock into one another, as it were. The following two do not, to my eye, exhibit this balance, but the two after them do. Then comes another partial break, and finally the last two on each side balance. This same balance is apparent, though less plainly, in the Bacchanalian scene, but I feel sure that, were this part in as good preservation as the other, it would be as obvious.

To sum up: we see in this work qualities that are Greek, others that are Eastern; we find the closest analogies to several of the scenes on Egyptian coins of the second century of our era,

and we find that these analogies have prototypes many centuries older in Hellas. We may note, further, that the coins are not so fine in workmanship as the mirror. Taking all this into consideration, we may infer with some confidence that the so-called mirror-case was, as I have already suggested, made by an artist working in Egypt under strong Hellenic influence a century or so before the birth of Christ; but, until we have more works of the same technique to compare with it, we have not the means to fix the date with exactness.

We have now considered what I believe are the most important features of this work, and it seems to me that the conclusion to be formed from them is, that its main value consists not in showing anything new to the mythologist or to the student of technique, but in exhibiting in a very strong light some of the essential and permanent qualities of Greek art — composition, balance, grace, and finally the fact that the Greek artist cared not to be startlingly original, but was willing to recognize that his function as an artist was to endeavor to add his little to the development of what had preceded him, and not to try to invent something entirely new.

It is a pleasure to work on a beautiful object, even if the result of one's work be of no great importance, and the pleasure is enhanced by friendly sympathy. In the study of this little mirror-case I have owed more than mere help to Mr. E. A. Gardner, the director, and to Mr. A. G. Bather, a member, of the British School at Athens.

RICHARD NORTON.

Athens, January, 1894.



A SILVER MIRROR-CASE IN THE NATIONAL MUSEUM AT ATHENS.